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Tips from top caterers make it easy to coordinate a wedding feast that is just your style.

By Stephanie Maher Palenque.

Photograph courtesy of Michael's at the Citadel



When I was growing up, a very wise woman—my mother—told me that there were two ingredients for a successful party: good music and, above all, good food. That bit of wisdom now comes to mind every time I plan a party. I've found that guests care very little about location, flowers, the color of the bridesmaids' dresses, or how the women in the bridal party wear their hair. The thing guests always remember is the food.

When planning your special day, don't ever lose sight of the fact that you will have a legion of passionate, excited people at your wedding, and with that high emotion comes hunger. Feed your guests in style and make your wedding an event they will talk about for years to come.

Flavor of the Southwest

Compared to the rest of the nation, Arizonans tend to lean toward hosting more casual affairs. While the pressure isn't on you to host the event of the social season, bridal couples still like to celebrate in style. "We [Arizonans] don't have all of the sit-down formal affairs that are held back East," says Ann Tally of Ann's Special Occasions Catering in Phoenix. "The main thing to remember is to work within your budget and stay within a set price range. Don't go out and mortgage your house in order to pay for everything; if it's that tight, cut your guest list down." Tally recommends that brides should make choices, including alcohol selections, based on their personal taste.

Victoria Canada of Victoria Canada Weddings & Events in Phoenix notes that while sit-down receptions offer more time for toasts and formal parts of the festivities, there is a definite trend toward more interactive food service rather than traditional buffet-style arrangements. "With food-station setups, guests can take an active part in their meal and be entertained at the same time," she says. "Risotto bars, mashed potato bars ... they're all very chic right now." Specialty food items and do-it-yourself bars allow guests to create their own menu items, she explains. "While providing an engaging activity, interactive food stations also ensure that guests enjoy their fare."

Dahl & DiLuca Decadent Catering in Sedona, owned by Lisa Dahl and Andrea DiLuca, takes advantage of the scenic beauty of the Southwest by presenting Mediterranean-style food with inimitable panache. Whether catering an event off-premises in a scenic enclave or serving guests at one of two highly regarded restaurants, Dahl & DiLuca is prefaced by the slogan: "In Food we Trust." Doesn't that say it all? "Ninety-nine percent of the time, guests attend a wedding and expect the food to be mediocre at best; our philosophy is just the opposite. If you have visited the restaurant, had food that you love and a positive experience, the wedding we cater for you should provide the same experience to your guests," says Dahl.

Honor Your Roots

If you have roots in another part of the country, opting for cuisine local to that area adds a nice touch. "Back East" flavor is what Corrado Latino, owner of Corrado's New Jersey Italian Deli and Corrado's Mediterranean Catering in Phoenix, offers couples who are entertaining diehard East coasters. His menu is filled with traditional Italian dishes such as lasagna, eggplant and chicken

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parmigiana, meatballs, fresh gnocchi, manicotti, fried calamari and rice balls -all homemade, of course. "Cassata" cakes (Italian cake made with canolli filling) are an East coast favorite often requested by clients.

Ann Tally recently had a request from a Romanian couple for a whole pig to be roasted for their reception. "You have to keep in mind that wedding tradition in the couple's home country of Romania includes receptions that frequently last for days," she explains. While roasting entire pigs isn't one of Tally's specialties, she was happy to accommodate the couple by providing chaffing dishes for serving the pork after roasting.

The Sky's the Limit

Most couples have a certain sense of entitlement when it comes to their wedding plans, and there's nothing wrong with playing this to the hilt. From special food to signature drinks, these requests will help ensure that your guests feel like royalty. For Kimberly Vahey's nuptials, Michael's at the Citadel in Scottsdale created a special martini station serving pink and green martinis to coordinate with the colors from her wedding theme. By request of the bridal couple, the full bar also served mojitos with a fresh mint garnish.

Victoria Canada has also been asked to incorporate signature drinks into catering plans, the most extravagant being a Lemon Drop. Requiring egg whites, lavender sugar and Meyer lemons, which had to be imported to Arizona at great logistical difficulty, there is no limit to the gastronomical hoops that dedicated wedding coordinators will go through to create the perfect taste sensation.

Catering Criteria

Usually the best way to find a caterer is by word of mouth. Choosing one purely from the Yellow Pages or Internet should be avoided if possible. "Call other couples [who] have used them and check their references," advises Canada. It's also a good idea to ask caterers to provide a tasting or sampling of the menu you're looking at, though Canada warns against considering only the taste of the caterer's food. "One wedding I attended did not have adequate waitstaff. It was an absolute nightmare," she recalls-proving that "little" details are just as important as the taste of the food when interviewing caterers. "Do they return your calls promptly? Are they easy to reach? They may be able to provide a great tasting sample for two people, but can they produce 150 of that sample, hot and on time?"

Corrado Latino stresses the importance of a comfortable personality fit with your caterer. "You and your caterer need to be 'on the same page' and see eye-to-eye on the basics," he says.

Above all, do your homework, have a good time, and savor every step in the process of planning your dream day. Bon appetite!